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Annotation

From Robert Silverberg's "Earthmen and Strangers" anthology, 1966:

When human beings begin to encounter strangers in the universe, conflict is likely to erupt. Earthmen, by and large, are an aggressive sort of people, and it would not be surprising to run into a race of equally aggressive, militaristic creatures Out There. This could produce a nasty crash as one culture meets the other in a head-on impact.

However, one feature of alien beings is their alienness: They are not likely to think the way we do. This story suggests, in a deliciously deadpan way, how a suitably clever human can befuddle and bamboozle his extraterrestrial captors simply by telling the truth. Randall Garrett, who wrote it, is a bearded, booming-voiced man who now makes his home in Texas and who has spent considerable time studying the art of creating confusion without exactly lying. His high-spirited stories have been appearing in science fiction's leading magazines since 1944, with some time out for service with the United States Marine Corps.

- The Best Policy

The Best Policy
by Randall Garrett

Thagobar Larnimisculus Verf, Borgax of Fenigwisnok, had a long name and an important title, and he was proud of both. The title was roughly translatable as "High-Sheriff-Admiral of Fenigwisnok," and Fenigwisnok was a rich and important planet in the Dal Empire. Title and name looked very impressive together on documents, of which there were a great many to be signed.

Thagobar himself was a prime example of his race, a race of power and pride. Like the terrestrial turtles, he had both an exo- and an endoskeleton, although that was his closest resemblance to the *chelonia*. He was humanoid in general shape, looking something like a cross between a medieval knight in full armor and a husky football player clad for the gridiron. His overall color was similar to that of a well-boiled lobster, fading to a darker purple at the joints of his exoskeleton. His clothing was sparse, consisting only of an abbreviated kilt embroidered with fanciful designs and emblazoned with a swirl of glittering gems. The emblem of his rank was engraved in gold on his plastron and again on his carapace, so that he would be recognizable both coming and going.

All in all, he made quite an impressive figure, in spite of his five feet two in height.

As commander of his own spaceship, the *Verf*, it was his duty to search out and explore planets which could be colonized by his race, the Dal. This he had done diligently for many years, following exactly his General Orders as a good commander should.

And it had paid off. He had found some nice planets in his time, and this one was the juiciest of the lot.

Gazing at the magniscreen, he rubbed his palms together in satisfaction. His ship was swinging smoothly in an orbit high above a newly-discovered planet, and the magniscreen was focused on the landscape below. No Dal ship had ever been in this part of the galaxy before, and it was comforting to have discovered a colonizable planet so quickly.

"A magnificent planet!" he said. "A wonderful planet! Look at that green! And the blue of those seas!" He turned to Lieutenant Pelquesh. "What do you think? Isn't it fine?"

"It certainly is, Your Splendor," said Pelquesh. "You should receive another citation for this one."

Thagobar started to say something, then suddenly cut it short. His hands flew out to the controls and slapped at switch plates; the ship's

engines squealed with power as they brought the ship to a dead stop in relation to the planet below. In the magniscreen, the landscape became stationary.

He twisted the screen's magnification control up, and the scene beneath the ship ballooned outward, spilling off the edges as the surface came closer.

"There!" he said. "Pelquesh, what is that?"

It was a purely rhetorical question. The wavering currents of two hundred odd miles of atmosphere caused the image to shimmer uncertainly, but there was no doubt that it was a city of some kind. Lieutenant Pelquesh said as much.

"Plague take it!" Thagobar snarled. "An occupied planet! Only intelligent beings build cities."

"That's so," agreed Pelquesh.

Neither of them knew what to do. Only a few times in the long history of the Dal had other races been found—and under the rule of the Empire, they had all slowly become extinct. Besides, none of them had been very intelligent, anyway.

"We'll have to ask General Orders," Thagobar said at last. He went over to another screen, turned it on, and began dialing code numbers into it.

Deep in the bowels of the huge ship, the General Orders robot came sluggishly to Me. In its vast memory lay ten thousand years of accumulated and ordered facts, ten thousand years of the experiences of the Empire, ten thousand years of the final decisions on every subject ever considered by Thagobar's race. It was more than an encyclopedia—it was a way of life.

In a highly logical way, the robot sorted through its memory until it came to the information requested by Thagobar; then it relayed the data to the screen.

"Hm-m-m," said Thagobar. "Yes. General Order 333,953,-216-A-j, Chapter MMCMXLDC, Paragraph 402. 'First discovery of an intelligent or semi-intelligent species shall be followed by the taking of a specimen selected at random. No contact shall be made until the specimen has been examined according to Psychology Directive 659-B, Section 888,077-q, at the direction of the Chief Psychologist. The data will be correlated by General Orders. If contact has already been made inadvertently, refer to GO 472,678-R-s, Ch. MMMCCX, Par. 553. Specimens shall be taken according to…' "

He finished reading off the General Order and then turned to the lieutenant. "Pelquesh, you get a spaceboat ready to pick up a specimen. I'll notify psychologist Zandoplith to be ready for it."

Ed Magruder took a deep breath of spring air and closed his eyes. It was beautiful; it was filled with spicy aromas and tangy scents that,

though alien, were somehow homelike—more homelike than Earth.

He was a tall, lanky man, all elbows and knees, with nondescript brown hair and bright hazel eyes that tended to crinkle with suppressed laughter.

He exhaled the breath and opened his eyes. The city was still awake, but darkness was coming fast. He liked his evening stroll, but it wasn't safe to be out after dark on New Hawaii, even yet. There were little night things that fluttered softly in the air, giving little warning of their poisonous bite, and there were still some of the larger predators in the neighborhood. He started walking back toward New Hilo, the little city that marked man's first foothold on the new planet.

Magruder was a biologist. In the past ten years, he had prowled over half a dozen planets, collecting specimens, dissecting them with precision, and entering the results in his notebooks. Slowly, bit by bit, he was putting together a pattern—a pattern of life itself. His predecessors stretched in a long line, clear back to Karl von Linne, but none of them had realized what was missing in their work. They had had only one type of life to deal with—terrestrial life. And all terrestrial life is, after all, homogenous.

But, of all the planets he'd seen, he liked New Hawaii best. It was the only planet besides Earth where a man could walk around without a protective suit of some kind—at least, it was the only one discovered so far.

He heard a faint swishing in the air over his head and glanced up quickly. The night things shouldn't be out this early!

And then he saw that it wasn't a night thing; it was a metallic-looking globe of some kind, and—

There was a faint greenish glow that suddenly flashed from a spot on the side of the globe, and all went blank for Ed Magruder.

Thagobar Verf watched dispassionately as Lieutenant Pelquesh brought the unconscious specimen into the biological testing section. It was a queer-looking specimen; a soft-skinned, sluglike parody of a being, with a pale, pinkish-tan complexion and a repulsive, fungoidal growth on its head and various other areas.

The biologists took the specimen and started to work on it. They took nips of skin and samples of blood and various electrical readings from the muscles and nerves.

Zandoplith, the Chief Psychologist, stood by the commander, watching the various operations.

It was Standard Procedure for the biologists; they went about it as if they would with any other specimen that had been picked up. But Zandoplith was going to have to do a job he had never done before. He was going to have to work with the mind of an intelligent being.

He wasn't worried, of course; it was all down in the Handbook,

every bit of Proper Procedure. There was nothing at all to worry about.

As with all other specimens, it was Zandoplith's job to discover the Basic Reaction Pattern. Any given organism could react only in a certain very large, but finite number of ways, and these ways could be reduced to a Basic Pattern. All that was necessary to destroy a race of creatures was to get their Basic Pattern and then give them a problem that couldn't be solved by using that pattern. It was all very simple, and it was all down in the Handbook.

Thagobar turned his head from the operating table to look at Zandoplith. "Do you think it really will be possible to teach it our language?"

"The rudiments, Your Splendor," said the psychologist. "Ours is, after all, a very complex language. We'll give him all of it, of course, but it is doubtful whether he can assimilate more than a small portion of it. Our language is built upon logic, just as thought is built upon logic. Some of the lower animals are capable of the rudiments of logic, but most are unable to grasp it."

"Very well; we'll do the best we can. I, myself, will question it."

Zandoplith looked a little startled. "But, Your Splendor! The questions are all detailed in the Handbook!"

Thagobar Verf scowled. "I can read as well as you, Zandoplith. Since this is the first semi-intelligent life discovered in the past thousand years or so, I think the commander should be the one to do the questioning."

"As you say, Your Splendor," the psychologist agreed.

Ed Magruder was placed in the Language Tank when the biologists got through with him. Projectors of light were fastened over his eyes so that they focused directly on his retinas; sound units were inserted into his ears; various electrodes were fastened here and there; a tiny network of wires was attached to his skull. Then a special serum which the biologists had produced was injected into his bloodstream. It was all very efficient and very smoothly done. Then the Tank was closed, and a switch was thrown.

Magruder felt himself swim dizzily up out of the blackness. He saw odd-looking, lobster-colored things moving around while noises whispered and gurgled into his ears.

Gradually, he began to orient himself. He was being taught to associate sounds with actions and things.

Ed Magruder sat *in* a little four-by-six room, naked as a jaybird, looking through a transparent wall at a sextette of the aliens he had seen so much of lately.

Of course, it wasn't these particular bogeys he'd been watching, but they looked so familiar that it was hard to believe they were here

in the flesh. He had no idea how long he'd been learning the language; with no exterior references, he was lost.

Well, he thought, I've picked up a good many specimens, and here I am, a specimen myself. He thought of the treatment he'd given his own specimens and shuddered a little.

Oh, well. Here he was; might as well put on a good show—stiff upper lip, chin up, and all that sort.

One of the creatures walked up to an array of buttons and pressed one. Immediately, Magruder could hear sounds from the room on the Other side of the transparent wall.

Thagobar Verf looked at the specimen and then at the question sheet in his hand. "Our psychologists have taught you our language, have they not?" he asked coldly.

The specimen bobbled his head up and down. "Yup. And that's what I call real force-feeding, too."

"Very well; I have some questions to ask; you will answer them truthfully."

"Why, sure," Magruder said agreeably. "Fire away."

"We can tell if you are lying," Thagobar continued. "It will do you no good to tell us untruths. Now—what is your name?"

"Theophilus Q. Hassenpfeffer," Magruder said blandly.

Zandoplith looked at a quivering needle and then shook his head slowly as he looked up at Thagobar.

"That is a lie," said Thagobar.

The specimen nodded. "It sure is. That's quite a machine you've got there."

"It is good that you appreciate the superiority of our instruments," Thagobar said grimly. "Now—your name."

"Edwin Peter St. John Magruder."

Psychologist Zandoplith watched the needle and nodded.

"Excellent," said Thagobar. "Now, Edwin—"

"Ed is good enough," said Magruder.

Thagobar blinked. "Good enough for what?"

"For calling me."

Thagobar turned to the psychologist and mumbled something. Zandoplith mumbled back. Thagobar spoke to the specimen.

"Is your name Ed?"

"Strictly speaking, no," said Magruder.

"Then why should I call you that?"

"Why not? Everyone else does," Magruder informed him.

Thagobar consulted further with Zandoplith and finally said: "We will come back to that point later. Now… uh… Ed, what do you call your home planet?"

"Earth."

"Good. And what does your race call itself?"

"Homo sapiens."

"And the significance of that, if any?"

Magruder considered. "It's just a name," he said, after a moment.

The needle waggled.

"Another lie," said Thagobar.

Magruder grinned. "Just testing. That really *is* a whizzer of a machine."

Thagobar's throat and face darkened a little as his copper-bearing blue blood surged to the surface in suppressed anger. "You said that once," he reminded blackly.

"I know. Well, if you really want to know, *Homo sapiens* means 'wise man.' "

Actually, he hadn't said "wise man"; the language of the Dal didn't quite have that exact concept, so Magruder had to do the best he could. Translated back into English, it would have come out something like "beings with vast powers of mind."

When Thagobar heard this, his eyes opened a little wider, and he turned his head to look at Zandoplith. The psychologist spread his horny hands; the needle hadn't moved.

"You seem to have high opinions of yourselves," said Thagobar, looking back at Magruder.

"That's possible," agreed the Earthman.

Thagobar shrugged, looked back at his list, and the questioning went on. Some of the questions didn't make too much sense to Magruder; others were obviously psychological testing.

But one thing was quite clear, the lie detector was indeed quite a whizzer. If Magruder told the exact truth, it didn't indicate. But *if* he lied just the least tiny bit, the needle on the machine hit the ceiling—and, eventually, so did Thagobar.

Magruder had gotten away with his first few lies—they were unimportant, anyway—but finally, Thagobar said: "You have lied enough, Ed."

He pressed a button, and a nerve-shattering wave of pain swept over the Earthman. When it finally faded, Magruder found his belly muscles tied in knots, his fists and teeth clenched, and tears running down his cheeks. Then nausea overtook him, and he lost the contents of his stomach.

Thagobar Verf turned distastefully away. "Put him back in his cell and clean up the interrogation chamber. Is he badly hurt?"

Zandoplith had already checked his instruments. "I think not, Your Splendor; it is probably only slight shock and nothing more. However, we will have to retest him in the next session anyhow. We'll know then."

Magruder sat on the edge of a shelflike thing that doubled as a low table and a high bed. It wasn't the most comfortable seat in the world, but it was all he had in the room; the floor was even harder.

It had been several hours since he had been brought here, and he still didn't feel good. That stinking machine had *hurt*! He clenched his fists; he could still feel the knot in his stomach and—

And then he realized that the knot in his stomach hadn't been caused by the machine; he had thrown that off a long time back.

The knot was caused by a towering, thundering-great, ice-cold rage.

He thought about it for a minute and then broke out laughing. Here he was, like a stupid fool, so angry that he was making himself sick! And that wasn't going to do him *or* the colony any good.

It was obvious that the aliens were up to no good, to say the least. The colony at New Hilo numbered six thousand souls—the only humans on New Hawaii, except for a couple of bush expeditions. If this ship tried to take over the planet, there wouldn't be a devil of a lot the colonists could do about it. And what if the aliens found Earth itself? He had no idea what kind of armament this spaceship carried nor how big it was—but it seemed to have plenty of room inside it.

He knew it was up to him. He was going to have to do something, somehow. What? Could he get out of his cell and try to smash the ship?

Nope. A naked man inside a bare cell was about as helpless as a human being can get. What, then?

Magruder lay on his back and thought about it for a long time.

Presently, a panel opened in the door and a red-violet face appeared on the other side of a transparent square in the door.

"You are doubtless hungry," it said solemnly. "An analysis of your bodily processes has indicated what you need in the way of sustenance. Here."

The quart-size mug that slid out of a niche in the wall had an odd aroma drifting up from it. Magruder picked it up and looked inside. It was a grayish-tan, semitranslucent liquid about the consistency of thin gravy. He touched the surface with his finger and then touched the finger with his tongue. Its palate appeal was definitely on the negative side of zero.

He could guess what it contained: a score, more or less, of various amino acids, a dozen vitamins, a handful of carbohydrates, and a few percent of other necessities. A sort of pseudo-protoplasmic soup; an overbalanced meal.

He wondered whether it contained anything that would do him harm, decided it probably didn't. If the aliens wanted to dope him, they didn't need to resort to subterfuge, and besides, this was

probably the gunk they had fed him while he was learning the language.

Pretending to himself that it was beef stew, he drank it down. Maybe he could think better on a full stomach. And, as it turned out, he was right.

Less than an hour later, he was back in the interrogation chamber. This tune, he was resolved to keep Thagobar's finger off that little button.

After all, he reasoned to himself, I might want to lie to someone, when and if I get out of this. There's no point in getting a conditioned reflex against it.

And the way the machine had hurt him, there was a strong possibility that he just might get conditioned if he took very many jolts like that.

He had a plan. It was highly nebulous—little more than a principle, really, and it was highly flexible. He would simply have to take what came, depend on luck, and hope for the best.

He sat down in the chair and waited for the wall to become transparent again. He had thought there might be a way to get out as he was led from his cell to the interrogation chamber, but he didn't feel like tackling six heavily armored aliens all at once. He wasn't even sure he could do much with just one of them. Where do you slug a guy whose nervous system you know nothing about, and whose body is plated like a boiler?

The wall became transparent, and the alien was standing on the other side of it. Magruder wondered whether it was the same being who had questioned him before, and after looking at the design on the plastron, decided that it was.

He leaned back in his chair, folded his arms, and waited for the first question.

Thagobar Verf was a very troubled Dal. He had very carefully checked the psychological data with General Orders after the psychologists had correlated it according to the Handbook. He definitely did not like the looks of his results.

General Orders merely said: "No race of this type has ever been found in the galaxy before. In this case, the commander will act according to GO 234,511,006-R-g, Ch. MMCDX, Par. 666."

After looking up the reference, he had consulted with Zandoplith. "What do you think of it?" he asked. "And why doesn't your science have any answers?"

"Science, Your Splendor," said Zandoplith, "is a process of obtaining and correlating data. We haven't enough data yet, true, but we'll get it. We absolutely must not panic at this point; we must be objective, purely objective." He handed Thagobar another printed

sheet. “These are the next questions to be asked, according to the Handbook of Psychology.”

Thagobar felt a sense of relief. General Orders had said that in a case like this, the authority of action was all dependent on his own decision; it was nice to know that the scientist knew what he was doing, and had authority to back it.

He cut off the wall polarizer and faced the specimen on the other side.

“You will answer the next several questions in the negative,” Thagobar said. “It doesn’t matter what the real and truthful answer may be, you will say No; is that perfectly clear?”

“No,” said Magruder.

Thagobar frowned. The instructions seemed perfectly lucid to him; what was the matter with the specimen? Was he possibly more stupid than they had at first believed?

“He’s lying,” said Zandoplith.

It took Thagobar the better part of half a minute to realize what had happened, and when he did, his face became unpleasantly dark. But there was nothing else he could do; the specimen had obeyed orders.

His Splendor took a deep breath, held it for a moment, eased it out, and began reading the questions in a mild voice.

“Is your name Edwin?”

“No.”

“Do you live on the planet beneath us?”

“No.”

“Do you have six eyes?”

“No.”

After five minutes of that sort of thing, Zandoplith said: “That’s enough, Your Splendor; it checks out; his nervous system wasn’t affected by the pain. You may proceed to the next list.”

“From now on, you will answer truthfully,” Thagobar said. “Otherwise, you will be punished again. Is *that* clear?”

“Perfectly clear,” said Magruder.

Although his voice sounded perfectly calm, Magruder, on the other side of the transparent wall, felt just a trifle shaky. He would have to think quickly and carefully from now on. He didn’t believe he’d care to take too much time in answering, either.

“How many *Homo sapiens* are there?”

“Several billions.” There were actually about four billions, but the Dal equivalent of “several” was vaguely representative of numbers larger than five, although not necessarily so.

“Don’t you know the actual number?”

“No,” said Magruder. *Not right down to the man, I don’t.*

The needle didn't quiver. Naturally not—he was telling the truth, wasn't he?

"All of your people surely aren't on Earth, then?" Thagobar asked, deviating slightly from the script. "In only one city?"

With a sudden flash of pure joy, Magruder saw the beautifully monstrous mistake the alien had made. He had not suspected until now that Earthmen had developed space travel. Therefore, when he had asked the name of Magruder's home planet, the answer he'd gotten was "Earth." But the alien had been thinking of New Hawaii! *Wheeee*!

"Oh, no," said Magruder truthfully. "We have, only a few thousand down there." Meaning, of course, New Hawaii, which was "down there."

"Then most of your people have deserted Earth?"

"Deserted Earth?" Magruder sounded scandalized. "Heavens to Betsy, no! We have merely colonized; we're all under one central government."

"How many are there in each colony?" Thagobar had completely abandoned the script now.

"I don't know exactly," Magruder told him, "but not one of our colonized planets has any more occupants on it than Earth."

Thagobar looked flabbergasted and flicked off the sound transmission to the prisoner with a swift movement of his finger.

Zandoplith looked pained. "You are not reading the questions from the Handbook," he complained.

"I know, I know. But did you hear what he said?"

"I heard it." Zandoplith's voice sounded morose.

"It wasn't true, was it?"

Zandoplith drew himself up to his full five feet one. "Your Splendor, you have taken it upon yourself to deviate from the Handbook, but I will not permit you to question the operation of the Reality Detector. Reality is truth, and therefore truth is reality; the Detector hasn't erred since—since *ever*!"

"I know," Thagobar said hastily. "But do you realize the implications of what he said? There are a few thousand people on the home planet; all the colonies have less. And yet, there are *several billion* of his race! That means they have occupied around ten million planets!"

"I realize it sounds queer," admitted Zandoplith, "but the Detector never lies!" Then he realized whom he was addressing and added, "Your Splendor."

But Thagobar hadn't noticed the breach of etiquette. "That's perfectly true. But, as you said, there's something queer here. We must investigate further."

Magruder had already realized that his mathematics was off kilter; he was thinking at high speed.

Thagobar's voice said: "According to our estimates, there are not that many habitable planets in the galaxy. How do you account, then, for your statement?"

With a quick shift of viewpoint, Magruder thought of Mars, so many light-years away. There had been a scientific outpost on Mars for a long time, but it was a devil of a long way from being a habitable planet.

"My people," he said judiciously, "are capable of living on planets with surface conditions which vary widely from those of Earth."

Before Thagobar could ask anything else, another thought occurred to the Earthman. The thousand-inch telescope on Luna had discovered, spectroscopically, the existence of large planets in the Andromeda Nebula. "In addition," he continued blandly, "we have found planets in other galaxies than this."

There! *That* ought to confuse them!

Again the sound was cut off, and Magruder could see the two aliens in hot discussion. When the sound came back again, Thagobar had shifted to another tack.

"How many spaceships do you have?"

Magruder thought that one over for a long second. There were about a dozen interstellar ships in the Earth fleet—not nearly enough to colonize ten million planets. He was in a jam!

No! Wait! A supply ship came to New Hawaii ever six months. But there were no ships on New Hawaii.

"Spaceships?" Magruder looked innocent. "Why, we have no spaceships."

Thagobar Verf shut off the sound again, and this time, he made the wall opaque, too. "No spaceships? *No spaceships* ? He lied… I hope?"

Zandoplith shook his head dolefully. "Absolute truth."

"But—but—but—"

"Remember what he said his race called themselves?" the psychologist asked softly.

Thagobar blinked very slowly. When he spoke, his voice was a hoarse whisper. "*Beings with minds of vast power*."

"Exactly," said Zandoplith.

Magruder sat in the interrogation chamber for a long time without hearing or seeing a thing. Had they made sense out of his statements? Were they beginning to realize what he was doing? He wanted to chew his nails, bite his lips, and tear his hah-; instead, he forced himself to outward calm. There was a long way to go yet.

When the wall suddenly became transparent once more, he

managed to keep from jumping.

"Is it true," asked Thagobar, "that your race has the ability to move through space by means of mental power alone?"

For a moment, Magruder was stunned. It was beyond his wildest expectations. But he rallied quickly.

How does a man walk? he thought.

"It is true that by using mental forces to control physical energy," he said carefully, "we are able to move from place to place without the aid of spaceships or other such machines."

Immediately, the wall blanked again.

Thagobar turned around slowly and looked at Zandoplith. Zandoplith's face looked a dirty crimson; the healthy violet had faded.

"I guess you'd best call in the officers," he said slowly; "we've got a monster on our hands."

It took three minutes for the twenty officers of the huge *Verf* to assemble in the Psychology Room. When they arrived, Thagobar asked them to relax and then outlined the situation.

"Now," he said, "are there any suggestions?"

They were definitely *not* relaxed now. They looked as tense as bowstrings.

Lieutenant Pelquesh was the first to speak. "What are the General Orders, Your Splendor?"

"The General Orders," Thagobar said, "are that we are to protect our ship and our race, if necessary. The methods for doing so are left up to the commander's discretion."

There was a rather awkward silence. Then a light seemed to come over Lieutenant Pelquesh's face. "Your Splendor, we could simply drop an annihilation bomb on the planet."

Thagobar shook his head. "I've already thought of that. If they can move themselves through space by means of thought alone, they would escape, and their race would surely take vengeance for the vaporization of one of their planets."

Gloom descended.

"Wait a minute," said Pelquesh. "If he can do that, *why hasn't he escaped from us*?"

Magruder watched the wall become transparent. The room was filled with aliens now. The big cheese, Thagobar, was at the pickup.

"We are curious," he said, "to know why, if you can go anywhere at will, you have stayed here. Why don't you escape?"

More fast thinking. "It is not polite," Magruder said, "for a guest to leave his host until the business at hand is finished."

"Even after we… ah… disciplined you?"

"Small discomforts can be overlooked, especially when the host is acting in abysmal ignorance."

There was a whispered question from one of Thagobar's underlings and a smattering of discussion, and then:

"Are we to presume, then, that you bear us no ill will?"

"Some," admitted Magruder candidly. "It is only because of your presumptuous behavior toward me, however, that I personally am piqued. I can assure you that my race as a whole bears no ill will whatever toward your race as a whole or any member of it."

Play it up big, Magruder, he told himself. *You've got 'em rocking—I hope*.

More discussion on the other side of the wall.

"You say," said Thagobar, "that your race holds no ill will toward us; how do you know?"

"I can say this," Magruder told him; "I know—beyond any shadow of a doubt—exactly what every person of my race thinks of you at this very moment.

"In addition, let me point out that I have not been harmed as yet; they would have no reason to be angry. After all, you haven't been destroyed yet."

Off went the sound. More heated discussion. On went the sound.

"It has been suggested," said Thagobar, "that, in spite of appearances, it was intended that we pick you, and you alone, as a specimen. It is suggested that you were sent to meet us."

Oh, brother! This one would have to be handled with *very* plush gloves.

"I am but a very humble member of my race," Magruder said as a prelude—mostly to gain time. But wait! He was an extraterrestrial biologist, wasn't he? "However," he continued with dignity, "my profession is that of meeting alien beings. I was, I must admit, appointed to the job."

Thagobar seemed to grow tenser. "That, in turn, suggests that you knew we were coming."

Magruder thought for a second. It had been predicted for centuries that mankind would eventually meet an intelligent alien race.

"We have known you were coming for a long time," he said quite calmly.

Thagobar was visibly agitated now. "In that case, you must know where our race is located in the galaxy; you must know where our home base is."

Another tough one. Magruder looked through the wall at. Thagobar and his men standing nervously on the other side of it. "I know where you are," he said, "and I know exactly where every one of your fellows is."

There was sudden consternation on the other side of the wall, but

Thagobar held his ground.

"What is our location then?"

For a second, Magruder thought they'd pulled the rug out from under him at last. And then he saw that there was a per feet explanation. He'd been thinking of dodging so long that he almost hadn't seen the honest answer.

He looked at Thagobar pityingly. "Communication by voice is so inadequate. Our coordinate system would be completely unintelligible to you, and you did not teach me yours if you will recall." Which was perfectly true; the Dal would have been foolish to teach their coordinate system to a specimen—the clues might have led to their home base. Besides, General Orders forbade it.

More conversation on the other side.

Thagobar again: "If you are in telepathic communication with your fellows, can you read *our* minds?"

Magruder looked at him superciliously. "I have principles, as does my race; we do not enter any mind uninvited."

"Do the rest of your people know the location of our bases, then?" Thagobar asked plaintively.

Magruder's voice was placid. "I assure you, Thagobar Verf, that every one of my people, on every planet belonging to our race, knows as much about your home base and its location as I do."

Magruder was beginning to get tired of the on-and-off sound system, but he resigned himself to wait while the aliens argued among themselves.

"It has been pointed out," Thagobar said, after a few minutes, "that it is very odd that your race has never contacted us before. Ours is a very old and powerful race, and we have taken planets throughout a full half of the galaxy, and yet, your race has never been seen nor heard of before."

"We have a policy," said Magruder, "of not disclosing our presence to another race until it is to our advantage to do so. Besides, we have no quarrel with your race, and we have never had any desire to take your homes away from you. Only if a race becomes foolishly and insanely belligerent do we trouble ourselves to show them our power."

It was a long speech—maybe too long. Had he stuck strictly to the truth? A glance at Zandoplith told him; the chief psychologist had kept his beady black eyes on the needle all through the long proceedings, and kept looking more and more worried as the instrument indicated a steady flow of truth.

Thagobar looked positively apprehensive. As Magruder had become accustomed to the aliens, it had become more and more automatic to read their expressions. After all, he held one great

advantage: they had made the mistake of teaching him their language. He knew them, and they didn't know him.

Thagobar said: "Other races, then, have been… uh… punished by yours?"

"Not in my lifetime," Magruder told him. He thought of *Homo neanderthalensis* and said: "There was a race, before my time, which defied us. It no longer exists."

"Not in your lifetime? How old are you?"

"Look into your magniscreen at the planet below," said the Earthman in a solemn tone. "When I was born, not a single one of the plants you see existed on Earth. The continents of Earth were nothing like that; the seas were entirely different.

"The Earth on which I was born had extensive ice caps; look below you, and you will see none. And yet, we have done nothing to change the planet you see; any changes that have taken place have come by the long process of geologic evolution."

"*Gleek*!" It was a queer sound that came from Thagobar's throat just before a switch cut off the wall and the sound again.

Just like watching a movie on an old film, Magruder thought. *No sound half the time, and it breaks every so often*.

The wall never became transparent again. Instead, after about half an hour, it slid up silently to disclose the entire officer's corp of the *Verf* standing at rigid attention.

Only Thagobar Larnimisculus Verf, Borgax of Fenigwisnok, stood at ease, and even so, his face seemed less purple than usual.

"Edwin Peter St. John Magruder," he intoned, "as commander of this vessel, Noble of the Grand Empire, and representative of the Emperor himself, we wish to extend to you our most cordial hospitality.

"Laboring under the delusion that you represented a lower form of life, we have treated you ignominiously, and for that we offer our deepest apologies."

"Think nothing of it," said Magruder coolly. "The only thing that remains is for you to land your ship on our planet so that your race and mine can arrange things to our mutual happiness." He looked at all of them. "You may relax," he added imperiously. "And bring' me my clothes."

The human race wasn't out of the hole yet; Magruder was perfectly well aware of that. Just what should be done with the ship and the aliens when they landed, he wasn't quite sure; it would have to be left up to the decision of the President of New Hawaii and the Government of Earth. But he didn't foresee any great difficulties.

As the *Verf* dropped toward the surface of New Hawaii, its commander sidled over to Magruder and said, in a troubled voice: "Do

you think your people will like us?"

Magruder glanced at the lie detector. It was off.

"*Like* you? Why, they'll *love* you," he said.

He was sick and tired of being honest.